Reflecting on Teacher Professionalism: A Student Perspective

by Warren F. Crouse

By engaging in the four stages of reflection, educators can bring a personal student perspective into the discussion of what characteristics identify teachers as professionals.

Professional teachers—individuals who provide students with instruction, guidance, direction, support, motivation, and comfort—have been, are, and will be a part of our future. As current or former students who have interacted with one or more teachers, we can reflect on the characteristics of our own teachers. That reflection can be a methodological process and model toward a better understanding of what identifies teachers as professionals.

Teacher professionalism: What do these two words bring to mind? Reflect on what characteristics your own teachers possessed that provided you with impetus to pursue the things you have accomplished. According to York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, and Montie (2001, 6), "reflective practice is a deliberate pause to assume an open perspective, to allow for higher-level thinking processes . . . for examining beliefs, goals, and practices, to gain new or deeper understandings that lead to actions to improve learning for students." Thus, as students examining

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I challenge you to engage in reflective practice on the subject of teacher professionalism—a process that is demonstrated in this article. Just as I reflect here on the "best of the best" teacher professionals that I have encountered in my past, you are urged to let your "reflections flow" and engage in an "inner dialogue" on teacher professionalism (York-Barr et al. 2001, 48). How did you become the educator that you are? Historically reflect, constitutionally reflect, and reflect on the topic to constructively reflect for the future.

Stages of Reflection

To "constructively reflect" on teacher professionalism, it is imperative that the four reflective stages for action are carried out. To illustrate the process, I will briefly outline the process of reflective practice as offered by York-Barr et al. (2001), propose variations for academic meaning, and focus the process on teacher professionalism.

Topical Reflection

The first step is "reflection-on-action" or to reflect on the present, which I will refer to here as *topical reflection.* The contemporary issue is, what is teacher professionalism? The answers are infinite, including, among others: another wave of restructuring and reform; changes in certification requirements for new teacher candidates; development of new professional standards based on political and economic considerations; research and definition of expected behavioral characteristics and dispositions for new teachers; and a new battery of teacher examinations.

The possibilities for discourse by politicians, policy makers, researchers, and scholars are endless! Do we need yet more "blue ribbon" panels, lectures, symposiums, and theme articles in leading scholarly journals? Would we benefit from yet more conferences to attend, more articles to read, and more staff and faculty meetings in which to explore, debate, and prioritize teacher professionalism proposals? Most certainly, new panaceas will be advocated to address the problem that the same group of players were involved in creating. It will be difficult to justify that the monies spent will have a direct benefit for any child attending school and trying to better himself or herself for a future that none of us can predict.

As students examining teacher professionalism, we must assume the role of knowledge seeker and learner.

Historical Reflection

The second step is to "reflect back," or *historically reflect.* Reflect on who was instrumental in your own experience, as a former student, to become a professional educator or student of education. To start the reflection process for bringing voices of students into the discussion on teacher professionalism, let's briefly reflect on 20th-century American history. This period was marked by rapid and unprecedented changes in our global political and military influence, a technological revolution, and economic unpredictability, all which profoundly influenced the social conditions of America's citizenry. Through it all, offering instruction, guidance, direction, support, motivation, and comfort regarding these and future unforeseen events were our teachers.

Were these teachers professionals? Let's reflect on that. Did they not educate many new immigrant children? Did they not educate many children from diverse backgrounds? Did they not educate each of us to the best of their abilities? Were they not a product of an American educational system, contemporary teacher training, and teacher regulations? Most importantly, were they not responsible for the actual education of the policy makers and politicians who have become the most vocal proponents on the need to reconfigure, reform, and standardize American education?

By seeking to discuss the need to "professionalize" the teaching profession in the United States, are we to assume that it is not presently, or has not been, carried out by competent professionals? Can we not, instead, assume that teachers always have approached the education of students in a professional manner? Each of us, after all, has been a student. Yet, the voices of students are markedly absent from most discussions of teacher professionalism.

Do not all of the speakers, authors, politicians, researchers, administrators, and workshop presenters, owe much to the one or more

teachers, indeed professionals, who assisted in their own unique educational development and helped provide them with the ability to enjoy their present position?

Constitutional Reflection

The third step is to "reflect within," or *constitutionally reflect.* York-Barr et al. (2001, 47) asked: "What does your heart, emotions, and inner being tell you about the topic of teacher professionalism?" As I demonstrate the second and third steps of reflection, I encourage you to remember John Dewey's (1929, 171) garden analogy:

> *. . . each of us needs to cultivate his own garden. But there is no fence about this garden: it is no sharply marked off enclosure. Our garden is the world . . . we, who are also parts of the moving present, create ourselves as we create an unknown future.*

Professional teachers, as gardeners, were part of the process of preparing a century of learners to play a positive role in the political, economic, and social American and global future.

My Personal Garden

To demonstrate the process of constitutional reflection, I offer, as a first-person account, my own personal garden and the teachers who helped me grow. I challenge each of you to use what follows as a model to reflect similarly on his or her own K–12 experiences. By engaging in cooperative reflection, I believe that we can move forward constructively on the issue of teacher professionalism.

I began school in November 1950 in a large urban-neighborhood public school in Toronto, Ontario. Neither my parents nor the school principal could get me to attend school for two months. Why? I was frightened of the huge solid wood doors that separated the inside of the school from the outside world that I knew. It was not until the principal and my mother enlisted the support of the

kindergarten teacher that my trust level in entering the school and the classroom was gained. The kindergarten class was a team-taught learning environment. The kindly teacher reassured me and took me to the huge windows to wave goodbye to my mom.

After that, the garden of learning in a school was opened for me. My first activity was to engage in making a paper chain with the rest of my classmates. It was a learn-by-doing project in which each of us had a part. As students, we then put all of our sections together to demonstrate the togetherness of our class. A variation was done at the entry of a new student. The way my first teacher introduced me to school must have been successful in that I have not left schools for more than a half century.

Let's look at some of the skills that this wonderful teacher engaged in: child development, motivation, school/parent partnering, and instructional methodology through content acquisition and cooperative learning. This teacher was just the start. Historically reflecting on the educational experiences I encountered through 13 years of schooling in two countries and three public school districts, I can honestly state that, in spite of being a less-than-stellar student in high school, I never encountered a teacher who did not justify professional status.

My Teacher Gardeners

Reflecting on my past K–12 teachers, I present the following four individuals as fine examples of "true" teacher professionalism—my teacher gardeners as remembered by a student.

Ursula Adams. An event in 1952 holds a lasting memory for me. My mother woke me for school with the news that the King (of England) had died. At school, my classmates and I were greeted by Miss Adams, who informed us that King George the 6th had passed away and that his daughter Elizabeth would be the new monarch. The transition was flawless. We had become used to singing "God Save the King" during morning exercises; that day, we sang "God Save the Queen." Miss Adams's class became a hub of project-based learning for the next several months as we prepared for the positive part of this world transition—the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Working in small groups, each of us brought whatever materials we could from home and used them to prepare our own expressions of what the coronation meant. I

brought a shredded-wheat box and, with my partner, made the Queen's coronation carriage.

Miss Adams was a project-based current-events teacher who taught both first and second graders in one regular classroom. She practiced what are now referred to as *continuous progress, multigrading,* and *looping.* I progressed nicely during my two years with Miss Adams, acquiring reading and math knowledge and skills. When informed that I would be moving to another country, Miss Adams introduced basic facts about the United States and remarked about the positives of the move. Looking back, I remember that, educationally, she made me feel comfortable with the move to the United States before I made the journey.

Frederick Cheney. After the move from Toronto, Ontario, to Lackawanna, New York, my family moved to a semi-rural area in Hamburg, New York, where Mr. Cheney was the only fifth-grade teacher in a small, one-grade-per-level building. Mr. Cheney was my first male teacher, as well as a coach and later a principal. He was a positive individual who developed cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills in his students regardless of their abilities. Mr. Cheney's class was filled with a rich variety of activities. It was in his class that I became confident that I had strong math ability. He exposed me to fundamental algebra, even though it was not at that time part of the fifth-grade curriculum.

Mr. Cheney's apparent philosophy was that if you had the ability, he would develop it; if you did not have the ability, he was still going to expose you to new things. To that end, he exposed me to formal athletics, acting, and technology. The program to which Mr. Cheney exposed all of his students provided us a rich depth of experiences. Even though we had separate physical education and music teachers, Mr. Cheney constantly would expand on their instruction. To this day, I recall my positive experiences working on the audiovisual team and having a lead in the school play. Mr. Cheney was an exemplary teacher who brought out the best in all of his students.

These teachers, and many others who were indeed professionals, provided me with first-rate instruction.

April May Raab. Miss Raab, my eighth-grade American history teacher, had a unique ability to engage her learners with narrative and imagery that helped her students experience what living in the past would have been like. Using a variety of means, such as facilitating group discussion and activities, providing aligned historical literature, vividly describing the time period or historical topic, and bringing in audiovisual materials, she was able to take you back for the purpose of looking forward. Each winter, when the snow falls on trees, I envision the winters during the Revolutionary War and the conditions colonial soldiers experienced fighting for our freedoms. To this day, I am fascinated with *living history.* I also recall that Miss Raab engaged her students in goal setting and individual assessment meetings. She was an inspiration for any future social studies teacher.

Evelyn Morgan. In the early '60s, when Mrs. Morgan taught a ninth grade general science course, she always wore her lab coat and incorporated microbiology lab experiences. Mrs. Morgan was a hands-on science teacher who encouraged her students to probe through the asking of questions. She inspirationally provided encouragement for her students to continue taking science courses and to respond to challenges facing the United States in the post-Sputnik mindset that gripped the nation at that time. I fondly recall Mrs. Morgan's words, which she wrote to me in my yearbook: "To Warren, the boy with the numerous questions. Here's hoping you always find the answers."

These teachers, and many others who were indeed professionals, provided me with first-rate instruction. They used a contemporary curriculum that prepared my classmates and I to assume a variety of rewarding and fulfilling roles throughout the United States and the world. I urge you to do your own similar reflection on teacher professionalism so that you may reflect forward to discuss and develop a meaningful debate on teacher professionalism from the student perspective.

Reflection for Action

The fourth step in the stages of reflection is to reflectively construct, or what York-Barr et al. (2001) referred to as *reflection for action.* On the subject of teacher professionalism, the next step is for educators to collectively work to-

ward construction of new approaches and ideas on teacher professionalism. Scholars and experts have provided us with their views on the topic.

Ann Lieberman (1988) offered several pertinent points of view from leading authors in the field. She cited Phillip Schlechty's 1987 speech to the Holmes Group (in Lieberman 1988, 7), which detailed three constructs of the work of teaching—service, performance, and leadership—arguing that leadership "should be the ideal that we use to guide the teaching occupation now, because the concept of teacher as leader considers students not as clients or audience but as intellectual workers themselves—and this is what our society needs." Linda Darling-Hammond (1988, 76), discussing teacher professionalism, argued, "to secure meaningful and lasting educational change in this country, we must be prepared to create new and ultimately more productive forms of governance and accountability for public schools that will allow teachers to practice professionally in the interests of students while preserving our democratic traditions."

Firestone and Bader (1992, 3) pointed out that the language used on the topic ". . . often obfuscates important differences. [However] when one digs beneath the rhetoric . . . each side has different images of what teaching reforms should accomplish and how teachers should operate."

A Call for Constructive Reflection

Should we continue to argue and debate the topic of teacher professionalism toward no realistic or pragmatic conclusion? Most of my teachers, I imagine, would have answered emphatically: "No! We have some serious learning to do. What are the issues? How do we research the issues from both a historical and current perspective? What conclusions have you reached? And how are *you* going to go out in the world and make a difference?"

As reflective professionals, the following questions should become the common link and focus of our discussion on teacher professionalism: How do schools become places where students and teacher learn and enjoy the process? As York-Barr et al. (2001, 158) questioned: "What would a desirable school look like to you? How might you be part of that vision? How might you be part of making that vision a reality?" Devaney and Sykes (1988, 20) suggested, "each school must build its own work culture, unique and appropriate to its own population of students and teachers and to its community's goals and resources."

Teachers are professionals who, in each of their gardens, help students learn. Is there reason to think otherwise?

In conclusion, after assuming the student's perspective and engaging in the reflective process, it is my contention that teachers are professionals, have been professionals, and hopefully will continue to be professionals. Your teachers and my teachers have provided us with instruction that has afforded the United States to achieve an unparalleled position of power and wealth in the world. The only change that is necessary is to share our past successes and failures and our enormous power and wealth with our diverse world neighbors for the betterment of mankind.

To "reflect for action," let's savor the words of Bogue (1991, 98) on the collective voice of teachers:

> *We have a promise to keep. The promise is to our children and the promise is in our children. We do not have to demean our past to improve our future. We do not have to look back in shame nor forward in fear if we are willing to forge partnerships in which we can sustain honest criticism and reinforce the best in performance.*

I have shared my personal reflections about my first day in school, making links to a chain. It is now up to you to reflect topically, historically, and constitutionally. Together, we reflect constructively to develop what already is a fact we all can attest to—teachers are professionals who, in each of their gardens, help students learn. Is there reason to think otherwise?

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